The Calm Workbook

A guide to greater serenity

Published in 2021 by The School of Life
70 Marchmont Street, London WC1N 1AB

Designed and typeset by Ryan Bartaby
Printed in Latvia by Livonia Print

A proportion of this book has appeared online at theschooloflife.com/thebookoflife

Every effort has been made to contact the copyright holders of the materials reproduced in this book. If any have been inadvertently overlooked, the publisher will be pleased to make restitution at the earliest opportunity.

The School of Life is a resource for helping us understand ourselves, for improving our relationships, our careers and our social lives – as well as for helping us find calm and get more out of our leisure hours. We do this through creating films, workshops, books, apps and gifts.

www.theschooloflife.com

ISBN 978-1-912891-49-8

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Introduction 4

The Pledge 6

1. A Beautiful Idiot 9
2. Overcoming Anger 17
3. Melancholy Calm 25
4. The Broken Pot Exercise 35
5. Compromise 39
6. Learning to Handle Moods 45
7. Keep It Simple! 51
8. It Will Go Wrong 57
9. But You Will Survive 61
10. Global Pessimism 67
11. Sublime Views 72
12. The Catastrophe Has Already Happened 80
13. Self-Hatred and Anxiety 86
14. If You Weren't Allowed to Worry about This … 88
15. Panic Attacks 90
16. Philosophical Meditation 94
17. Know Yourself 104
18. Living in Modernity 108
19. Telling the Story of Failure 127
20. Surrender Expectations 131
21. Impostor Syndrome 139
22. The Call of Death 143
23. Ecce Homo 145
24. You Are 'Good Enough' 147
25. Inner Voices 151
26. Remaining Calm around Other People 157
27. Care around the News 163
28. History and the News 167
29. No One Is Normal 166
30. A Quiet Life 173
31. Small Pleasures 177
32. Teasing Oneself 179
33. Keeping Faith with 'Rupture' and 'Repair' 181
34. Cheerful Despair 187

Introduction

This is a workbook about calm that recognises from the outset that attempting to be a permanently calm person is an impossible (and even dangerous) dream. There are too many reasons for us to be agitated for much of the time:

- We are intensely vulnerable physical beings: a blood clot the size of a grain of sand may kill us, an average life expectancy is only ever that and we are almost bound to be currently ignoring key bits of nutritional and medical advice.
- We have insufficient information upon which to base most of our life decisions: we steer largely blind when it comes to deciding on our careers or marriage partners, our economic choices or the welfare of those we love.
- We dwell in competitive, media-driven societies which imbue us with a sense that there is so much more we could achieve if only we were better able to understand ourselves and our opportunities. We have never done enough and, measured against what we might have been, we almost always prove a severe disappointment to ourselves.
- We are regularly panicked by news organisations which give us a picture of living on a chaotic planet fated to be destroyed and presently inhabited by billions of largely unstable and murderous fellow humans.
- Many of us have been through extremely complicated childhoods which have led us to be suspicious of ourselves, afraid of others, fearful of committing to love and sure that we deserve punishment.
- The progress of our careers and of our finances plays itself out within the tough-minded, competitive, random workings of an uncontained economic engine.
- We rely for our self-esteem and sense of comfort on the love of people we cannot control and whose needs and hopes will never align seamlessly with our own.

It is compelling to think that it would be possible to achieve permanent calm. But this hope can itself become a source of agitation. Setting our sights on an unreachable goal is destined to lead to frustration and disappointment. We should never seek the total elimination of anxiety. We should not – on top of everything else – be anxious that we are anxious. We should practise a degree of acceptance. Anxiety is no sign that our lives have gone wrong, merely that we are alive. We should spare ourselves the burden of loneliness; everyone is more anxious than they are inclined to tell us. We've collectively failed to admit to ourselves what we are truly like.

Nevertheless, we are all capable of improving a little on our capacities for calm in the face of inevitable frustrations and losses. To do this, we should graciously understand that maintaining calm is a fiendishly difficult project that requires us to submit to education. We're going to have to go back to school. Yet we can have faith that even if our lives are currently rather fraught, they are almost always open to being changed and improved – so long as we practise and build calming rituals into our days and nights.

This workbook brings together a wide range of exercises that can help us to accept ourselves more readily, soothe our worries about the uncertainties of the future, appease our rage against people who deny us our wishes and prepare us to greet life – every now and then, when we've had enough sleep – with a little more humour, benevolence and gratitude. The notion of practice is well understood in many areas – riding a bicycle or learning a new language, for example – and we should grant that it applies equally well to the field of calm. No one is intuitively good at calm. We all need to do a little homework.

Through this book, we confront a strange but important thought: that calm is a skill, not an emotion – and that we owe it to ourselves and our loved ones to undergo a few playful, intriguing and consoling exercises that can improve our capacity to maintain our poise.

Instructions on how to fill in this book

Throughout these pages, you will find sections highlighted in blue.

Take time to fill in as many exercises as feels comfortable.

Do not worry if you fall behind.

The Pledge

A calm life isn't one that's always perfectly serene. It is one where we are committed to recovering more readily after we have panicked, where we strive for more realistic expectations, where we can understand better why certain problems are occurring and where we can be more adept at finding a helpful perspective. The progress is painfully limited and imperfect – but it is genuine.

An irony is that the more calm matters to us, the more we stand to be aware of all the very many times when we have been less calm than we might have been. It can feel laughably hypocritical. Surely a genuine devotion to calm would mean ongoing serenity? But this isn't really a fair judgement to make, because being calm all the time isn't a viable option. What counts is the commitment we are making to the idea of being calmer.

We've got a mistaken picture of what the lover of calm looks like; we assume them to be among the most tranquil of the species. We're working with the highly misleading background assumption that the lover of something is the person who is really good at it. But the person who loves something is often the one who is hugely aware of how much they lack it, and therefore, of how much they need it.

For this reason, before attempting any of the exercises in this book, we want you to consider signing a declaration. We are interested in intentions, not (yet) in action.

If you can sign up to these words, however many anxieties you may have held or rages you may have fallen into, however hard serenity might appear to be, then half the battle at least has already been won.

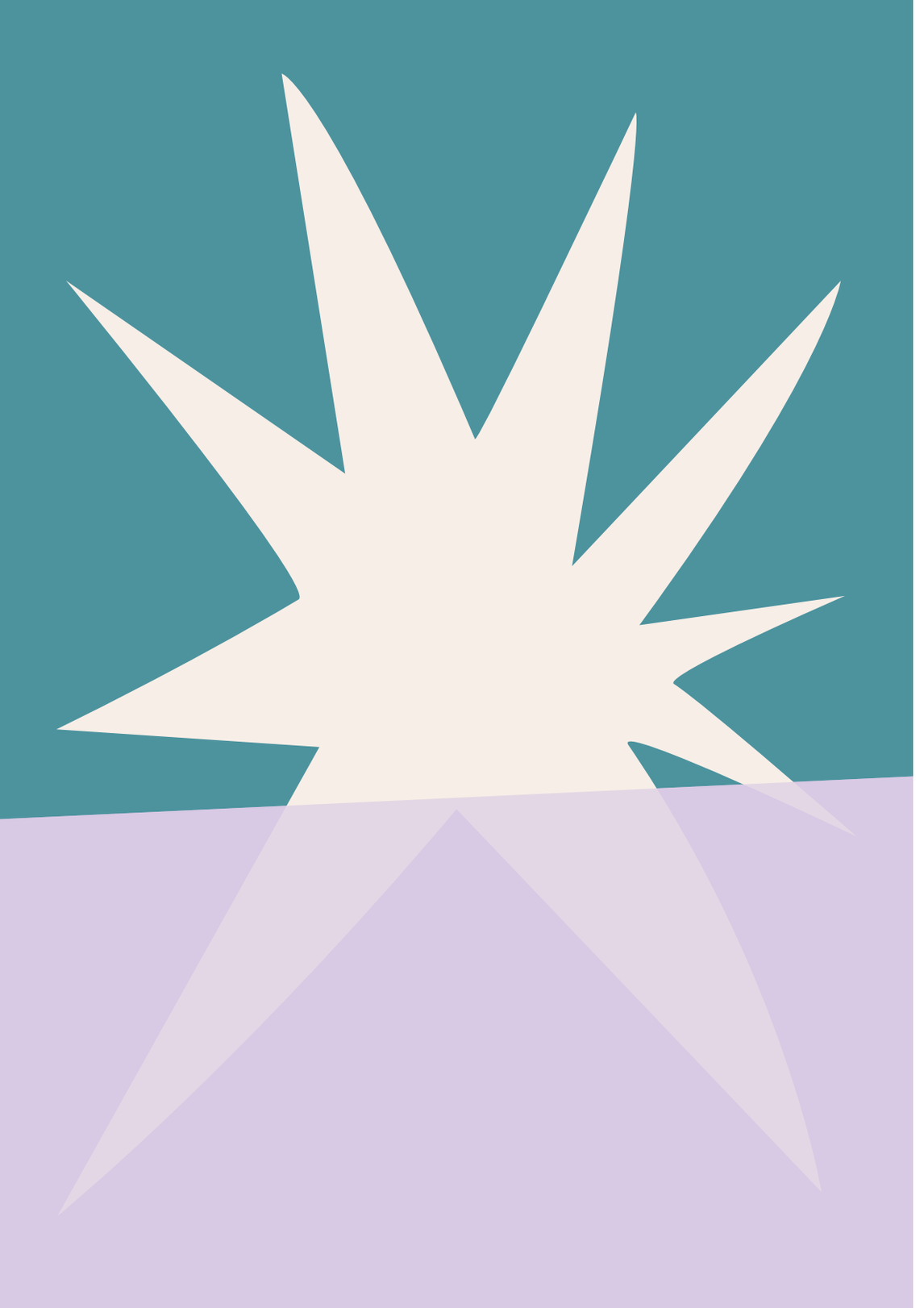
I am deeply attracted to calm.

Collectively, calm is extremely difficult: our species is ill-suited for long periods of tranquillity.

Individually, I have been through a range of experiences which have taught me (falsely but persuasively) that anger and agitation might often be the best or only course.

Sometimes, I will be unsuccessful in my attempts to become a calmer person. That is normal. I will not let this hold me back. Instead, I will endeavour regularly to practise ideas that could make things a little more manageable.

Signed:



2.
Overcoming Anger

There are many negative things in our lives – but the way we respond to them is not always the same. There is a crucial distinction to observe:

A distinction in how we respond to:

Things that make us angry	*Things that make us sad*

Please fill in the following table:

What makes me angry	What makes me sad

One of the things we immediately observe is that the difference between the angry things and the sad things has nothing necessarily to do with the scale or seriousness of the issue:

- You could be *sad* that your grandmother has died, but *angry* that you can't find your pencil.
- You could be *sad* that your early promise as a violin player hasn't been fulfilled, but *angry* that your child hasn't put the top back on the orange juice.

Both anger and sadness start off with a frustration, with a wish that has not been fulfilled. But the frustration will make us *sad when* it is expected. And *furious* when it is a *surprise*.

Frustration + Surprise = Anger

Frustration + Expectation = Sadness

What makes us angry are frustrations, large or small, that we haven't budgeted for; that we didn't expect to happen; that we were innocent about.

Paradoxically, people who end up getting angry a lot are, in the background, operating with very high expectations. We could even say that they are, in fact, strangely optimistic.

Angry people are optimists.

They don't *seem* optimistic, of course.

When you see an angry person in a rage, they appear extremely dark. But – we insist – they are, beneath all that, still at heart optimistic. They have refused to expect frustration. They have assumed that their wishes would sail through reality unscathed.

One major way to reduce anger is more regularly to expect that bad things will happen to us. We must try to move as many of the items on the chart we just made from Column A (What makes me angry) to Column B (What makes me sad).

We need to learn the art of intelligent, pre-emptive pessimism. We must learn to expect frustration so that life doesn't surprise us at a time of its own choosing. We always have to be sad in many areas, but we don't always need to be furious.

Beneath many of the things that make us angry lies an implicitly (and recklessly) optimistic world view. We don't generally realise the absurdity of this world view until it's pointed out – so it's worth teasing it out so that we might gently correct it and therefore be less surprised by reality:

What makes me angry	**I believe in a world in which …**
She's half an hour late – again!	*People are always completely on time*
The pizza is cold!	*Underpaid delivery drivers always provide the best possible pizza*
There's so much traffic!	*The roads are always traffic free*
Where are the damn keys?	*Keys, and other household items, never go astray*
Stop making that chewing sound!	*Nice people have no coarse bodily habits*

Write down some of your own frustrations, along with the optimistic world view from which they must spring:

What makes me angry	I believe in a world in which …

A pessimist is someone who assumes from the outset, and with a great deal of justification, that things tend to turn out really very badly in almost all areas of existence. Strange though it can sound, pessimism can be one of the greatest sources of human serenity and contentment.

There are so many good reasons to be a bit pessimistic: relationships are full of missed connections; sex is invariably an area of tension and longing; creative endeavour is pretty much always painful, compromised and slow; any job – however appealing on paper – will be pretty irksome in many of its details; children will always resent their parents, no matter how well-intentioned and kindly they may be. Politics is evidently a process of muddle and uncomfortable compromise. Try filling out the following list:

What will probably go wrong in my life

In love:

Around sex:

In work:

With family:

Around health:

In politics:

This might sound like a curious and grim exercise, but we should remember that our satisfaction in this life is critically dependent on our expectations. The greater our hopes, the greater the risks of rage, bitterness, disappointment and a sense of persecution.

Like optimists, pessimists would like things to go well. But by recognising that many things can – and probably will – go wrong, the pessimist is well placed to secure the good outcome both of these parties ultimately seek. It is the pessimist who, having never expected anything to go right, tends to end up calm – and with one or two things to smile about.

In what areas of your life could you learn to be a little more pessimistic than you are now?

The French philosopher Nicolas Chamfort (1741–1794) arrived at possibly the best piece of advice with which to navigate through life:

'A person should swallow a toad every morning to be certain of not encountering anything more revolting in the day ahead.'

Suggested morning thought exercise*

+

=

Serenity

*Do not try this at home.

3.
Melancholy Calm

The goal of learning the art of pessimism isn't to be depressed – it's to know how to practise the noble art of being melancholic.

Our era isn't very interested in melancholy. Instead, it directly and indirectly tends to promote two alternative emotions in particular:

Ecstatic happiness

When you think of your life, what might make you ecstatically happy if it happened?

Rage

What tends to catapult you into a rage?

But the truth is that there is in general very little *opportunity* for ecstatic happiness and little *justification* for rage. We would be wiser to aim for the middle position of *melancholy*.

Being melancholy doesn't have to mean being grumpy. Depicted in art, melancholy faces are often not smiling but not angry either. Instead, they look lost in thought, absorbed by their own ideas and wistful rather than desperate. They know that life is often sad – it doesn't surprise them and therefore throw them into fury; they're just slowly digesting disappointment while maintaining equanimity.

(Top) Rogier van der Weyden, *The Magdalen Reading*, c. 1438;
(Bottom) Giovanni Bellini, *Madonna and the Child between Saints Catherine and Mary Magdalene [detail]*, c. 1490.

Melancholy can seem mature and intelligent.

Melancholy is not rage or bitterness; it is a valuable species of sadness that arises when we are open to the fact that life is inherently difficult for everyone and that suffering and disappointment are at the heart of human experience. It is not a disorder that needs to be cured; it is a tender-hearted, calm, dispassionate acknowledgement of how much pain we must inevitably all travel through.

Modern society tends to emphasise buoyancy and cheerfulness. It is impatient with melancholy states and wishes either to medicalise them – and therefore 'solve them' – or deny their legitimacy altogether.

Melancholy links pain with wisdom and beauty. It springs from a rightful awareness of the tragic structure of every life. We can, in melancholy states, understand, without fury or sentimentality, that no one truly understands anyone else, that loneliness is universal and that every life has its full measure of shame and sorrow. The melancholic knows that many of the things we most want are in tragic conflict: to feel secure and yet to be free. To have money and yet not to have to be beholden to others. To be in close-knit communities and yet not to be stifled by the expectations and demands of society. To travel and explore the world and yet to put down deep roots. To fulfil the demands of our appetites for food, exploration and sloth and yet stay to thin, sober, faithful and fit.

The wisdom of the melancholy attitude (as opposed to the bitter or angry one) lies in the understanding that we have not been singled out; that our suffering belongs to humanity in general. Melancholy is marked by an impersonal take on suffering. It is filled with pity for the human condition.

The more melancholy a culture can be, the less its individual members need to be persecuted by their own failures, lost illusions and regrets.